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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002764

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: GOJ AND MPS BRISTLE AT ALLEGATIONS BY JORDANIAN ISLAMISTS

REF: A. AMMAN 2555

[B](#). AMMAN 2520

[C](#). AMMAN 2395

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) The Islamic Action Front (IAF) has denounced legislators who voted to approve a recent tax increase, prompting strong reaction from government officials. The GOJ also responded forcefully to allegations that it may have fabricated reports of a recent terrorist threat to the country. The Islamists have refused to back down and dropped hints that IAF legislators might consider withdrawing from Parliament (most unlikely). One observer believes that some Islamists have misinterpreted PM Fayez's outreach efforts as "a sign of weakness," emboldening them to confront the government. For his part, Fayez may have had unrealistic expectations about his ability to co-opt the Islamists through dialogue. End Summary.

STRONG RESPONSE TO IAF CRITICISM

[2](#). (U) IAF members of Parliament strongly criticized fellow MPs who approved the recent hike in the general sales tax, alleging that they had voted against the interests of the country. IAF foes struck back, with 36 MPs publicly denouncing the IAF for "casting doubt on the national stance of deputies" who voted for the tax hike, and accusing IAF members of "seeking to achieve narrow personal and partisan interests" through their attacks.

[3](#). (U) In an interview April 2 on the Jordan TV news program "60 Minutes," Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez stressed the government's "partnership" with Parliament. He said that the tax increase had been scaled back from the GOJ's original proposal in light of MP's concerns, and that he had twice met with members of the IAF before the tax law was approved to explain the country's financial situation. "I sat with them for five hours at the Parliament and another five hours at the residence of (IAF) MP Azzam Huneidi," said Fayez. Claiming that the IAF "does not represent the Jordanian street" and had "lost (its) balance," he further stated, "The problem of political work in Jordan is that some say reasonable things behind closed doors, but after that, they release statements to woo their electoral bases."

[4](#). (C) Subsequent efforts at rapprochement, spearheaded by the inexperienced Minister of Political Development & Parliamentary Affairs, Mohammad Daoudiyeh, made little headway. IAF members continued to complain strenuously about Fayez's TV comments. IAF MP Ali Abul Sukkar (Zarqa-2nd District), for example, told the press that Fayez's comments betrayed the government's purported policy of conducting domestic politics "based on dialogue and respect of each other's opinions." Reacting to GOJ claims that it did not offer "practical solutions" to the country's financial situation, the IAF issued a statement saying that Jordanians could have been spared a sales tax increase if the government applied "better tax collection measures." Moreover, the Islamists alleged that a rise in the price of fuel could have been avoided by improving the performance of the Jordan Petroleum Refinery Company.

[5](#). (U) Daoudiyeh likewise failed to take a conciliatory tone in his words to the media. "The IAF issues dozens of statements in the past against the government ... We refrained from responding ... But what prompted the premier's reply this time were the recent harmful and slanderous remarks issued by the (IAF)," said Daoudiyeh. During a government press conference April 5, Daoudiyeh strongly denounced IAF Secretary General Hamzeh Mansour for alleging that the GOJ fabricated reports of terrorists entering Jordan with explosives-laden vehicles (see ref a) for political reasons. "These allegations are totally inaccurate. Why would a government terrorize its own children and women, and at the same time tarnish its reputation and destroy its internal and external interests?"

IAF REFUTES CRIMINAL CHARGES

16. (SBU) A March 26 clash at the Wihdat refugee camp following the Israeli killing of Sheikh Yassin (see ref c) provided yet another source of friction between the IAF and the GOJ. Islamist legislators accused security forces of improperly detaining IAF activists (some 60 people total were arrested) and assaulting IAF MP Tayseer al-Fityani (West Banker, Amman-2nd District) during violence at the camp. On April 5, state prosecutor Mahmoud Obeidat formally charged two IAF deputies (including Fityani) and six other IAF members with participating in riots and illegal assembly. He ordered their detention for two weeks, but released them on bail of 2,000 Jordanian dinars (roughly 2,800 USD) each the same day. An official IAF statement called this action "a dangerous precedent and an insult that tarnishes the image of the country's Lower House deputies." (NOTE: The immunity from prosecution that MPs enjoy while Parliament is in session ended when the legislature concluded its regular session April 1.)

17. (U) On April 7, Obeidat added five charges against the two MPs including damaging public property, slandering the King, and demeaning and burning the Jordanian flag. Obeidat told the press the new charges were prompted by a videotape of the demonstration showing the two deputies speaking. Abul Ragheb countered that the two "only spoke of people who normalized with Israel and did not utter any statements that were slanderous to his Majesty." Meanwhile, a Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) spokesperson told London daily Al-Hayat that "the Jordanian street" was demanding the resignation of the 17 IAF deputies from Parliament due to the "government's escalation against Islamist leaders." Muslim Brotherhood Controller General Abdul Majeed al-Dhunaibat similarly announced that Jordanian Islamist groups were insisting on the resignation of Islamist MPs "in view of the return to the suppression of freedoms and the backing down on the democratic course."

FAYEZ TO RETHINK STRATEGY?

18. (C) Ali Hindawi, Chairman of the Legislative Board at the Prime Minister's office, told PolOff April 4 that PM Fayeze had grown disillusioned with his efforts to engage the IAF given recent events. According to Hindawi, some within the IAF and/or Muslim Brotherhood had misinterpreted the PM's attempts to reach out to Islamists as a "sign of weakness" which in turn had emboldened them to take a more confrontational approach vis-a-vis the government. While Hindawi did not state that Fayeze would end his dialogue with Islamists, he intimated that the PM might reevaluate his soft approach in dealing with the Islamic movement. Fayeze subsequently held a meeting April 11 with Islamist leaders who demanded that the GOJ thoroughly investigate the Wihdat riot and to drop all charges against IAF members. Little progress in resolving differences was reportedly made.

COMMENT

19. (C) Jordanians have grown unaccustomed to open political tussles between government and opposition, so this episode garnered widespread attention. While the IAF may be the main opposition body in the Parliament, it has been careful to balance criticism against the GOJ on some issues with a degree of cooperation on others to avoid alienating the government and risking a possible backlash. We doubt the IAF MPs will resign since the movement generally recognizes that it lost political ground during its self-imposed absence from Parliament from 1997-2003. It is ironic that Fayeze's outreach to Islamists, intended to build consensus, may have instead contributed to a more combative IAF and greater resulting political discord. However, it may have been naive of Fayeze to believe he could co-opt the IAF through dialogue alone.

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